

Q: Good afternoon. Today is June 8th, 2017. My name is Gregory Brumberg. I am here at Newton North High School and I will be interviewing Will Wei. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. I have a few questions for you, Mr. Wei. First off I'm going to ask you what country are you originally from, why did you leave that country, and how old were you when you left?

A: I came to US for graduate study in 1987 when I was 30 years old, from China.

Q: May I ask what part of China you're from?

A: Yeah, it's the southern part of China, from Fujian province, Xiamen Fujian.

Q: Did you come here with anyone else or did you go alone as a graduate student?

A: Just myself.

Q: Alright. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience leaving China and arriving in America?

A: Yeah. At that time it's relatively rare, but it's so-called "self-made effort." Although it's been approved by--I was a graduate student already--by the college, and of course, by the embassy and by whatever agency in China that has to approve it. It wasn't too hard, even though it was a relatively new experience.

Q: To give us a sense of what was happening in the world at that time, what year did you come to America?

A: '87.

Q: Alright. I think that gives us good context about what was happening. So you came here as a graduate student. What made you want to stay in America, and specifically choose Newton?

A: Good question. Certainly it's so-called land of opportunity. At that time China was very different from what China is today. The US was much better in many ways, relatively comparing to China today. So of course, if nothing else, just to advance my academic training.

Q: You talked about China being very different, but I'm also interested, can you compare and contrast your life in China in '87 with your life in America in '87?

A: That's interesting. Yes. My family actually is above average. Both my parents are professors, so we lived above living standard. Still--my dad actually came here in the late '40's as a graduate student, so we saw [00:02:34]. Still, the living standard is just compare. It's hard you know, dollar by yen, because the price difference there, but still, it's just a pretty different world in terms of living standard, in terms of academics.

Q: I want to ask you specifically, what was your first day in America like, if you can recall?

A: The best I can recall is I arrived in San Francisco and then to New York--that's my first memory, that's interesting. So I landed at--what is that--JFK, I believe, not LaGuardia, in New York City. And one of my fellow graduate students, a year older than me, drove all the way from college which was in Lewes, Delaware to New York City to pick me up. And sure, I remember it's the nighttime, just look at the lights, the highway, and just completely stunned. Wow! Look at all those cars! Remember what I said, in China at that time there were very few cars. So that's first impression.

Q: I'm glad you had a really good first impression in America. So what made you ultimately move to Newton?

A: I relocated quite a bit. After I graduated with my PhD, I was lucky, got a postdoc training at MIT. Then I landed in Boston from Lewes, Delaware. And then a few moves in Korea. I bought my first house in Watertown, and when my oldest son was school-aged, we shopped around for the best school district or city--Newton, Lexington. We ended up pick Newton and no regrets, so far. Still better than Lexington.

Q: I'm really interested in your story of learning English. Did you start studying in China, or did you arrive in America speaking no English, and just in the belly of the beast picked up the language?

A: That's also an interesting question. Actually remember I said my father spent his graduate study in the US, so he knew English well. So when I was little at the time nobody doing anything in school--so-called Cultural Revolution. So I remember one day my dad asked me "Hey you need to pick out something you like to do, English, whatever." My mom was a chemist--science. And I don't know what to say, I just said "English." But then I didn't do anything anyway. So really serious study of English is in college. My college happened to be very strong in English. And so I still remember I have to catch up from the lowest level. When I graduate, I'm probably around the top level. So mostly in college, English.

Q: So you went to college in China and you also went to college in America. So could you talk about the different cultures between American and Chinese cultures, but also the difference in cultures between your homeland and your new life in America?

A: College-wise or just in general life-wise it's much more relaxed here, easy. People [00:05:51] more relaxed and easy here, and people seemed more open and friendly, both in school or outside of school.

Q: To adopt this new culture, did you make any changes to your lifestyle?

A: Yeah, I learned to be also more open and friendly myself. And in China I grew up again more in the Chinese tradition, but also influenced by the chaotic year of revolution. I was very introvert, and I was a lot more--It also helped, I became an administrator for many, many years. I had to manage people, had to deal with clients, communicate with all different collaborators, so that also helped.

Q: In addition to changes in your lifestyle, were there any traditions that you maintained?

A: Yeah, absolutely. I'll pick a few things. The Chinese, we're known to be hard-working. I like to say I'm still pretty hard working even though I sort of retire, still enjoy my learning every day. Family tie. I'm very close to all my family. My dad, 97, still healthy. My siblings, my two sons. I'm very close to them. So family tie, hard-working. I'd like to add another one, because I saw [00:07:19] about US culture here. I would like to say Chinese are more long-term planning in many ways: family planning, financially responsible, we save more than many Westerners, United States included, so I kept that too.

Q: You mentioned this earlier with your family, but when you came to America at first or after you graduated and started working here, what were your hopes and aspirations for yourself and your family?

A: Better life, simply put. I think it's still true.

Q: And do you think those have come to fruition?

A: Yes, very much.

Q: Before you came to America--I'm interested in your perception of America and then how that changed when you came here.

A: That's hard...vaguely, it's just more advanced economically, academically, many other ways. And that's certainly true even today. If you want to compare China with the US, China is catching up very quickly. Still, realistically, significant gap between two countries in many ways, still even today.

Q: Do you still feel a lot of connections or ties to China? Do you ever come back to celebrate the Chinese New Year or for other major holidays and see family?

A: Yeah, still very close. I'd like to put, simply put, China is still my birth country and the United States my adoptive country, so both I care very deeply [00:09:00]. I love both countries both very much in different ways.

Q: I'm also really curious in how you raised your kids. So, here surrounded by Western culture. But how did you raise them to maintain their strong Chinese identity and values?

A: Man, that's a whole interview by itself. But it's very important. I'm glad you bring it up. It's challenging continuously. But I'm pretty proud to say that we've done relatively well. So, in Chinese culture you try to infuse them as hard-working, be a good person for yourself, for the family, for the whole society. But in the Western culture we're much more equal. So I'd like to say I'm not exaggerating too much, we're both like father and son and also friends. I'm very close to my family. They both graduated from Newton High School, by the way. You can ask

their friends and also even they come back, tell me, “Hey, my friends like you very much. I’m very proud to have a father like you.” And my young son, who graduated two years ago, was for two years vice-president of his class and now he’s the president of his fraternity at NYU. So thanks to the school he’s doing very well.

Q: So it seems like you’ve had a lot of very important and meaningful situations and experiences when you were in America. Could you touch on a few of those?

A: Important, significant experiences in America?

Q: Yeah, or in Newton.

A: First, of course, got my PhD. That’s my direct goal in coming to this country. And I was very fortunate to get an opportunity to be a postdoc at MIT, one of the top institutions. Then I got lucky again, I was hired by Harvard as an administrator of a Harvard department. Those are three major steps. I got my academic training completed, moved to the top institution in the country, and then moved to another top institution to be a senior administrator. And I feel--I like to put us in there, not only be successful immigrants and I very proudly call myself a nation builder in this country as well, because all those amazing, famous professors, academics, Nobel Prizes--I’m face to face with them and I feel that I help them in a variety of ways. So even today whenever friends and visitors come I jump at the opportunity to give them a tour of Harvard, my Harvard. So, I’m very proud.

Q: It seems like you’ve had a wonderful experience in America. I’m curious--did you face any challenges, maybe discrimination or lack of opportunity?

A: Well there’s two, for sure. First one is English. At that time, our English was much inadequate, at that time than today’s Chinese youngsters. I came to this country at 30 years old,

and as I said, I didn't carry out what I promised my dad, I didn't have much English until college. So even though I can read fine, but the verbal communication is very weak. So sitting in class first week, first month or two it's very challenging. Even today, sharing with some newcomers, it took me maybe no less than ten years until I got used to the conversation, not just understanding, but the essence, the cultural background, the historical theme of this country. It's language that's a challenge.

And the secondary is the point of discrimination. It's not too bad. But maybe one example, not necessarily discrimination, but my personal experience is that when I worked at MIT as a postdoc, it was very challenging, it was very hard. And I didn't feel--I felt like [00:13:15] be more respectful, but particularly compared to when I worked at Harvard as a director. So I tried to make some sense of it. Okay, when I was there I was a low-level scientist postdoc and at Harvard I'm a manager, so that would explain it. Another is--maybe true, maybe not--MIT is more engineers in the department working. At Harvard I worked in social science data center, so I try to say maybe social science people are just nicer. Not sure--but that feeling, it's probably justified. Now, that's definitely not necessarily discrimination. I remember when I first moved to Harvard, my predecessor--

__: Hi, excuse me--

A: --and his wife took me to lunch, and the wife extensively asked me some questions that tended a little bit on the borderline, the husband immediately said, "Hey, it's not appropriate." So it's a pretty positive experience for me. Let's just say I'm lucky. Not as much I feel that memorized discrimination. But all those years I [00:14:27] enough for my children's story, and they're doing fine too, but for federal Chinese-Americans, there's still plenty, particularly in this [00:14:38] there's serious concern about things might get worse instead of getting better, before they hopefully get better again.

Q: You've talked about a lot of wonderful memories from your more adult years in America. What about some good memories you have from your childhood in China, or maybe some negative memories about the Cultural Revolution, your experience being in China during that.

A: You know, I looked at the questions. This is the hardest question. It's [00:15:10]. Maybe it's something to do with the Cultural Revolution started when I was probably eight or nine years old, my [00:15:16] very busy even before that. But yeah, I would still say that I grew up in a very loving and lucky family. In other words, we never worried about food and clothing, and dad and mom always just talking about academic training. I'm the youngest of four siblings and my sisters and brother were doing very well, so I looked up to them--so all those are very positive. But then a lot of unpleasant memory in those 10 years, crazy Cultural Revolution too, but that's well-documented. So good memories and also some not so pleasant memories as well.

Q: If you mind me asking, you mentioned that your parents were professors, did they--do you think because they were intellectuals that your life during the Cultural Revolution was different than the other people around you?

A: You've heard about Cultural Revolution a little bit.

Q: Yeah.

A: Okay, that's why this question--

Q: Unless you don't want me to ask--

A: No...Because it sounds like you know some. The intellectuals at that time was the bottom class. They actually classified the Ninth Class, or whatever you call it. It was maybe Class Nine--that's professors. So it's pretty sad at the time. But fortunately my dad, and the place we

lived, was more protected. My father remember have a degree from US, so he was sort of protected. So we were not treated as bad as for example one of my aunt and uncle--my aunt and uncle in the same university, they actually sent to countryside. Not, you know, physically punished. But sent to countryside to be a farmer or do writings for farmers. My family stayed at university.

Q: Alright. I'd like to ask you about--you touched on the values and traditions of China and America. But could you specifically talk about some common beliefs or values that are shared between our two countries?

A: I like this one question. Because that's what I've actually been thinking and studying myself. I will start with by saying kindness, loving...I read an article about love is something that crosses all religions. That's certainly true, comparing Chinese culture and US culture here.

Hard-working--I would say the same. Even though the Chinese somehow have a reputation of working harder on average than people here, but particularly the elite or educated, there's plenty Americans who work pretty hard. Actually, my PhD advisor, who's a Chinese-American, who's academian, very successful.. When we were studying for a PhD he told us--this may not be politically correct--he said "This country is really supported by the top three per =cent of the people." So the top three, top five of these people work extremely hard in this country. So hard-work, kindness, and love--these are common.

Q: So you've talked about a little bit of the discrimination you faced. Could you talk a little bit more about the difficulties you've faced because of your cultural inheritance?

A: Yeah, yeah. Even today, as I said earlier...Unfortunately, we just look different--Asian, the yellow race. So our English, also, even compared to Indian-American, or people that come from India, not as smooth and well-trained as them. So these two, it's enough to sort of set us aside somewhat in a disadvantaged position. So I wouldn't say people discriminate against us; we are

indeed different in many ways, adding those cultural difference. Behavior, for example--one thing you probably learn when you're in China, Chinese tend to be even today more indirect than direct, so not expressing their feelings, and that cause a lot of confusion if not uncomfortable in your colleagues and your neighbors.

Q: You talked about how it took 10 years to pick up on the subtle nuances of the English language and the culture. Can you talk about that and give any advice to someone else moving to America?

A: Yeah, yeah. Actually, that's a good question. I was just going to say it myself, as my experience of sharing with newcomers. Just try to mix in as much as you can. Unfortunately, I read an article, seriously, a survey by reporters, just last month about new graduate students, new students from China, they're not--they sort of just hang out themselves. So definitely go mix with classmates, with neighbors, with community organization, activity as much as you can, with English speakers, rather than with Chinese fellows. That's probably the most effective way and most productive way, in the end, and make your life--make more friends, make everybody happy.

Q: Do you think there are any aspects of your cultural traditions that helped you immigrate or helped you assimilate?

A: My cultural values [00:21:09] Yeah, hard-working, for sure. Everybody like--my boss, my colleagues--all like hard worker. The other, it's--this is not again just unique in Chinese culture, right, US probably more so--open-minded. Just not rejecting anything you don't know, and not overly confident or arrogant about whatever you know yourself. So open-mind, mix in with your colleagues, with your classmates, with your neighbors.

Q: Is there someone from your culture that you admire?

A: Yeah, that's a good question. [00:21:58] Certainly my dad and mom. They set a role model's example. They were so busy they didn't have much time to always teach us something, but we just watched how they doing. So then I watched my siblings. Besides them, I certainly was very [00:22:19] just a couple others. For the past 15, almost 20 years, I'm very much into social science, culture, philosophy. So as you probably know, culture-wise, philosophy, Confucius is most well-known, right, he is still I would say most well-known and respected and contributed to Chinese culture.

The other--I actually gave a talk in Harvard to international students, and even Chinese students have no idea--Confucius! I can't rank them, right, but there is a story about Confucius visit Lao Tzu and came back stunned. He's saying "that guy is like a dragon." So, by that--and I do know Tao Te Ching, it's certainly another level up. Although it's not as applicable as Confucius theory in people's life, but it's much deeper, abstract level up there.

And let me go one level up--you might not have heard about it. There is a scripture called--I just saw yesterday, it's free, published to the United States colleges, and whatever professor [00:23:33] book. The book name, English name is called the Book of Changes, in Chinese called the I Ching. And that in Chinese philosophy is the name for--it's called the top scripture of every scripture. So the others in that tree you can compare the two books and over that call it a day. So, I Ching's author--you're asking who I admire most, so Confucius, Lao Tzu and they say there's three authors of the I Ching. And those were certainly amazing individuals not only to our culture, but to the world. I can quote you that most recently I read, there's quite a few, including the famous scholar Bernard--I think it's Bernard--Russell, a Nobel Prize winning British scholar-philosopher of literature. And he, simply put, he went to China when China was very miserable, almost the country dying. And he went, he came back, wrote these articles saying the Chinese scholar are very admirable. The one hand they learn from outside, the other [00:24:38] "If one day"--this is again he's writing-- "in order to survive the Chinese are forced or somehow

forgot their own culture, this is disaster for whole humanity.” So that’s not me, that’s one of the leading scholars. And he was basically impressed by all these philosophies the Chinese do.

Q: Mr. Wei, it looks like we are just about out of time. What is one more thing that you would like people a hundred years from now to know about your experience as an immigrant?

A: About my experience as an immigrant. That’s a good one. Let me put it this way: I hope 10 years, 15 years, certainly 100 years later the world will be a much more peaceful and united global community. So today, as a Chinese immigrant to United States, I seriously see myself as doing [00:25:43]. I have the culture and lived in both countries. By the way, this year is my 30 years here. So I lived 30 years in China, 30 years here. So I see it, like it or not, I’m sharing with all my Chinese fellows, like it or not, you are the break in the bridge of connecting United States and China. So my immigrant experience, I hope a hundred years people look back--and I’m not writing, I’m publishing--maybe people look and say “Hey, that article by Mr. William Wei actually makes some sense,” and help others as well as connecting these two greatest country in the world, building a peaceful global community altogether.

Q: Thank you so much for your time to help us with our project. We are really happy we are able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW